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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003980

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER IR IZ

SUBJECT: PESHMERGA PERSPECTIVE ON US SUPPORT

Classified By: Political Counselor Margaret Scobey for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) This is a PRT-Erbil cable, and the first of four from this source.

¶2. (C) Omar Othman (knows as Za'im Ali), the Kurdistan Regional Government's Minister of Peshmerga (KDP - Kurdistan (for consistency purposes only) Democratic Party) met Erbil IPAO to clarify Peshmerga and party views on Kurdish-U.S. relations, the PKK, negotiations with Baghdad, and freedom of the press. This cable addresses Za'im Ali's request for U.S. support of Kurdish demands in Iraq and the region.

"A Second Israel - But Advocate of Palestinian Rights"

¶3. (C) Omar Othman (known as Za'im Ali), the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) Minister of Peshmerga (KDP - Kurdistan Democratic Party), compared the KRG to a 'second Israel' because of its support of American policies and its opposition to terrorism. He developed this concept, saying that before 2003 the KRG got along well with 'the Arabs' (other Arab countries), but that now the Arab world hates the Kurds because the KRG supports the U.S.

¶4. (C) Za'im Ali said Kurds made sacrifices to stand by the U.S. and now they are paying the price. However, he said the case of the Palestinians also hurts the Kurds, because - like the Kurds - the Palestinians are struggling for their legitimate national rights. Za'im Ali stressed that the U.S. should pay more attention to the Kurdish region in Iraq and to Kurds throughout the Middle East. Kurds, he said, are strong - they also have enemies.

¶5. (C) Za'im Ali described Iraqi Kurds as a branch of American power in the region. Rhetorically, he asked, "If there is fighting between Iran and the U.S., will the KRG not intervene?" He continued, contending that the U.S. is the government of Iraq, and if the border of Iraq is penetrated by the Turks or Iranians, it is a penetration of the U.S. itself and would require an American response. Za'im Ali promised Kurdish military assistance to the U.S. in the rest of Iraq. Specifically addressing Kirkuk, he boasted, "If the U.S. transfers Kirkuk to use, within one week we can clear it out and make it safe." COMMENT: The displacement of non-Kurdish Iraqis from Kirkuk since 2003, as the Kurdish population has aggressively increased, would only be exacerbated by transferring security control of Kirkuk to the Kurds. The future referendum on the status of Kirkuk would then be even more significantly skewed toward an outcome that would ensure Kurdish control over the disputed province. END COMMENT.

Kurds and Shia Against Saddam

¶6. (C) Za'im Ali told IPAO that before 2003 Kurds and Shia Arabs were united in their struggle against Saddam Hussein's rule, and the KRG provided refuge for any Shia who were persecuted in the south. Continuing, he said Shia political power in Iraq now is due to Iranian pressure. More broadly, he commented that 'the KRG is not like the UAE or Fallujah, because they came to power through elections'. COMMENT: His statements did not address issues of the Shia population majority and proportional representation, but emphasized the long-standing American-Kurdish relationship which he considered should guarantee Kurdish dominance in Iraq. END COMMENT.

¶7. (C) Za'im Ali said Arabs and Iranians are looking ahead and planning strategically. He stressed repeatedly that 'time is not on the side of Iraq', because American public opinion is changing and the U.S. military will be leaving Iraq. He offered the KRG as a base for a continued American military presence in the region. NOTE: This is an offer integral to most U.S.- KRG conversations.

Who's Afraid of the KRG?

¶8. (C) Za'im Ali noted three issues that affect Kurds in Iraq: First, pan-Arabism opposes an independent Kurdistan; second, Iran fears a Kurdish national identity, especially

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its possible effect on Kurds in Iran; and third, Turkey - which has the same fears, has already acted against the Kurds and displaced many Kurds from along the border. This is against human rights, he said, just like Israeli actions against Palestinians. For the future, he said, American support of Kurdish 'national rights' in the Middle East as a whole is critical.

Comment

¶9. (C) Za'im Ali, a graduate of Baghdad Military Academy, fought with the Kurdish Peshmerga for over 30 years. He has been a KDP Politburo member since the 1980s, and has served as KRG President Massoud Barzani's deputy for Peshmerga Affairs. He was given the lead in resolving the KDP/PUK/MNF-I issues, indicating a high level of trust from Barzani. Za'im Ali takes a hard line on Peshmerga issues but is more pragmatic on the political questions of Kirkuk and independence. His more candid comments indicate a view that sufficient Peshmerga troops, arms, and equipment make the legal status of the KRG irrelevant, as the Kurdish government will then be able to enforce its will without effective opposition. He sees significant deeply-rooted divisions between the KDP and the PUK in spite of the administrative unification. He speaks little English, but is fluent in Arabic and Kurdish. Za'im Ali is more comfortable and less dogmatic with Western diplomats in a small group than in a larger, formal meeting. He also appears more forthcoming when not in the presence of the PUK.

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